

Lebanon's 2018 Parliamentary Elections The End of the “Shia Duo?”

⁽¹⁾ According to Nabih Berri's official biography, he was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on January 28, 1938. Doubts persist about the accuracy of that date, however, and suggest that he is two years older.

Literally and figuratively, it was not the first battle the 80-year-old man had fought⁽¹⁾ Compared to those earlier challenges, however, he was not feeling confident on this occasion. Typically private about his feelings, he did his best in the days immediately preceding the May 6, 2018 parliamentary election—despite the anguish and fatigue that may afflict people of his age—to remain positive and convey the impression that he retained full command not only of his “troops,” but of the overall situation as well.

Though not an enthusiastic adopter of “e” technologies, the evening before the election, he made it a point to meet (in his lavish residence-cum-political headquarters in Msayleh, south Lebanon) with a team of young militants from his Movement. The group had developed a particularly secure software application to enable electoral delegates in all regions to update the Msayleh headquarters on vote estimates.

On May 6, he intended to travel to his village of Tibnin (further south) and cast his vote as early as possible; however, logistical complications, which included poor coordination between his security team

⁽²⁾ Videos of the incident are available on the internet.

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and Hezbollah, delayed the departure of his convoy. Understandably, he became nervous. When he finally made it to the voting station with his wife, he nearly fell while trying to reach the voting booth, an incident that spiked his anxiety and startled his entourage.⁽²⁾ Among public figures, falling is anything but a trivial matter. Although not a single comment was made about the episode, it forced him to abbreviate his public performance and return to Msayleh earlier than planned.

Along the way, he recalled a similar event at the Arab summit last March 29 when President Michel Aoun—officially 84 years old—fell flat on his face.⁽³⁾ Since that accident prompted a number of hostile comments, he quickly began to see it as a bad omen.

After his return to Msayleh, he rested to prepare for the long night ahead and asked for an update at around 5 PM. He learned of several squabbles between AMAL militants and Hezbollah in different areas, and while concerned, he was more interested in the results of the vote. Unfortunately, the answers he received were mixed and worrisome, and they confirmed his worst fears.

More than anyone else, he was aware that the electoral law—voted into existence by the Lebanese parliament following some especially painful negotiations between the country's various political forces—was really a "Cain and Abel law." Despite its claimed "proportionality," it also justifies "political fratricide" among people running together and on the same ticket.

Of course, the old man has a working, real-

⁽⁴⁾ Preston, Matthew. "Ending Civil War: Rhodesia and Lebanon in Perspective." 2004. I.B. Tauris. New York. Between 1988 and the official end of the Lebanese war, Hezbollah and the AMAL Movement fought against each other at various locations within Beirut and south Lebanon. That series of engagements was sharp and unforgiving, and the cost to the Shia community included thousands killed and injured. Notably, these engagements were a brutal, physical expression of Syrian-Iranian competition over the Lebanese Shia community and control of south Lebanon. Unsurprisingly, these battles—and the war itself—ended on November 5, 1990 based on the substance of what has become known as the Second Damascus Agreement concluded between the leaders of the two Shia militias and with guarantees issued by their patrons in Damascus (AMAL) and Tehran (Hezbollah).

⁽⁵⁾ Until the 2009 elections (the last to be held in Lebanon until 2018), the Future Movement that belonged to Rafic Hariri and then his son, Saad, was permitted some minor Shia representation. Of note, the most recent elections ended that tradition.

world knowledge of fratricide, not only because he has practiced it personally (symbolically and factually), but also because he has been a victim.⁽⁴⁾ Yet, being aware of the conditions under which the law was enacted is vastly different from having the ability to reverse them. Long before such actions were taken by any other faction, the Shia duo made its joint election tickets public last February.

While other political parties were locked in painful discussions about their electoral alliances until just before the elections, the AMAL-Hezbollah alliance focused on the obvious. From its perspective, that "obvious" focus had little to do with elections. Rather, it centered on their (re)configuration of Lebanon's polity since the war "ended," a divergent reality in which political representation of Lebanese Shia (with some trivial exceptions) is being monopolized by the Shia duo: AMAL and Hezbollah.⁽⁵⁾

For Nabih Berri, who beyond heading the AMAL Movement/Militia has also been the speaker of the Lebanese parliament since 1992, even seemingly inconsequential details carry tremendous weight. His public trademark centers on a unique penchant for issuing short, murderous sentences based mainly on colloquialisms. Among his inner circle, however, Berri is known for his exceptional memory and the way he expertly and cynically pits members of his entourage against one another.

As mentioned above, however, on the evening of the vote, he wanted specific details. For instance, he wanted to know how many people had voted in a given village. Were any of the incidents that occurred

in different villages the result of unhealed scars associated with the AMAL-Hezbollah war? Who racked up the most votes at a given voting station? As the evening wore on and data was released to the media, Berri's counselors began telling him of the somewhat checkered victory. Yes, all of the AMAL candidates won, but their victories were largely Pyrrhic. Other than himself, AMAL candidates garnered just half (or less) of the preferential vote compared to their Hezbollah opponents. While the narrative issued by those in Msayleh that evening varies in terms of detail, all agreed that Nabih Berri threw a tantrum of biblical proportions, and it continues to resonate at the highest levels of AMAL.

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According to the incumbent sectarian seat repartitioning in the Lebanese parliament, Shia seats now number 27.⁽⁶⁾ A brief comparison of within-district and sub-district AMAL and Hezbollah candidates offers a clearer, more concise description of how the balance of power has been shaped as a result of the recent elections:

⁽⁶⁾The number of seats stands at 128, half of which are allocated to Muslims and half to Christians. By extension, Muslim seats are apportioned to the Sunni (27), Shia (27), Druze (8) and Alawi (2) segments of the population.

SOUTH II		
In addition to 1 Greek Catholic, this district elected 6 Shia. Organized into two sub-districts (Saida-Zahrani, 2 seats and Tyr, 4 seats), Hezbollah chose not to have a candidate in Saida-Zahrani, which left the seat available to AMAL. As a reminder, the preferential vote is based on the sub-district involved.		
Saida-Zahrani	Nabih Berri	42,137 votes
	Ali Osseiran	2,203 votes
TYR	Nawwaf Moussawi	24,379 votes
	Hussein Jishi	23,864 votes
	Inaya Ezzed-Din	18,815 votes
	Ali Khoreis	15,672 votes

Yellow: Hezbollah candidate, green: AMAL candidate

SOUTH III

In addition to 1 Sunni, 1 Druze and 1 Greek Orthodox, this sub-district elected 8 Shia candidates. It is divided into three sub-districts (Nabatiyyeh, Bint Jbeil and Marjeyoun-Hasbayya.

Nabatiyyeh	Mohammad Raad	43,797 votes
	Hany Kobayssi	20,504 votes
	Yassin Jaber	7,920 votes
Bint Jbeil	Hassan Fadlallah	39,722 votes
	Ali Bazzi	9,290 votes
	Ayyoub Homayyed	7,875 votes
Marjeyoun-Hasbayya	Ali Fayyad	27,460 votes
	Ali Hassan Khalil	16,765 votes

BEIRUT II

In addition to 6 Sunni, 1 Druze, 1 Greek Orthodox and 1 Protestant, this sub-district elected 2 Shia MPs.

Amin Sherri (*)	22,961 votes
Mohammad Khawaja	7,834 votes

(*) Of note, Saad Hariri who ran in this same district for one of the Sunni seats got fewer votes than Hezbollah's candidate, Amin Sherri.

Mount Lebanon I [Jbeil-Kesrwan]

In addition to 7 Shia, this sub-district elected 1 Shia MP. Although Hezbollah's candidate did not win, and while the "logic" behind the law according to which these elections were held permitted an "independent candidate" to fill this Shia seat with a ridiculously small number of votes (256), it is important to note that the Hezbollah candidate received the same number of votes as some of the Maronite winners (9,369 votes). This proves that Hezbollah was able to mobilize the Shia constituency within this small pocket situated in the heart of Lebanon's "Maronitland." Interestingly, after remarking on his victory, the Shia winner quickly swore allegiance to Nabih Berri!

Mustapha Hussein	256 votes
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Mount Lebanon III

in addition to 3 Maronites and 1 Druze, this sub-district, which includes the southern suburbs of Beirut (Dahiyeh), elected 2 Shia MPs elected 2 Shia MPs.

Ali Ammar

20,756 votes

Fadi Alame

6,348 votes

Bekaa I [Zahle]

In addition to the 1 Sunni, 1 Maronite, 2 Greek Catholic, 1 Greek Orthodox and 1 Armenian Orthodox, this sub-district elected 1 Shia MP. The Shia candidate, representing Hezbollah, received the higher rate of preferential votes in compared to each of the other candidates. The second place winner, Greek Catholic Elie Okeis (representing the Lebanese Forces), received 11,363 votes.

Anwar Jom'aa

15,601 votes

Bekaa II [Bekaa West-Rashayya]

In addition to the 2 Sunni, 1 Druze, 1 Maronite and 1 Greek Orthodox, this sub-district elected 1 Shia MP. In this case, the Shia candidate (who represented AMAL), received about half the number of preferential votes as Sunni Hezbollah candidate Abdul Rahim Mourad, who received 15,111 votes. This demonstrates clearly the expertise with which Hezbollah managed its portfolio of preferential votes.

Mohammad Nasrallah

8,897 votes

Bekaa III [Baalbeck-Hermel]

In addition to the 2 Sunni, 1 Maronite and 1 Greek Catholic, this sub-district elected 6 Shia MPs. The number of votes the AMAL candidate received compared to the Hezbollah candidate (approximately the same) should not be misconstrued. Hezbollah enjoys six times the number of votes AMAL has, and it can distribute those votes accurately. The number of votes received by Jameel as-Sayyed (formerly the Director General of General Security, one of four general officers arrested following the assassination of Rafic Hariri and an ardent supporter/protégé of the Assad regime) makes a rather obvious political statement.

Jameel as-Sayyed

33,223 votes

Ihab Hamade

18,404 votes

Ghazi Zaayter

17,767 votes

Ali Mokdad

17,321 votes

Ibrahim al-Moussawi

16,942 votes

Hussein Hajj Hassan

15,662 votes

⁽⁷⁾ For an overview of the law according to which the 2018 elections were held, see "'Our' New Electoral Law: Proportional in Form, Majoritarian at Heart," available at <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=117>

Explanations for the dramatic loss of AMAL popularity among Shia voters vary according to the conclusions one wants to reach. For instance, the most optimistic AMAL perspective attributes this poor outcome to the electoral law itself, which ostensibly forced voters to select a "closed ticket." Those same AMAL voices assert that the voting public, including the Shia, are unfamiliar with exigencies of that new law.⁽⁷⁾ According to those who advocate that point of view, large swaths of AMAL voters declined to go to the voting stations because they did not want to be forced to vote for a particular candidate—especially one representing Hezbollah. While this explanation may seem initially to have some degree of likelihood, it actually introduces a problem of even greater severity, specifically AMAL's ability to mobilize its capacity against that of Hezbollah. Thus, if AMAL is fully aware of the nuances of the electoral law but was unable to mobilize its voter base to achieve outcomes even similar to those enjoyed by the Hezbollah candidates, then the results of these elections may offer a genuine indication of the popular balance of power within the AMAL-Hezbollah duo, which has long since monopolized representation of Lebanon's Shia population!

Yet, while that optimistic AMAL perspective has gained some popularity because of its sedative effect, this "passive resistance" theory still lacks credibility. In short, it fails to concentrate on the details of the election and instead centers on AMAL's gradual weakening compared to Hezbollah (publicly, of course, both entities continue to characterize their alliance as a bond between equals). From a strictly historical perspective, however, one must recall that during the mid-1980s, Hezbollah situated

itself as AMAL's competitor for the hearts and minds of the Lebanese Shia (see note 4, above). But while that act marks the beginning of AMAL's gradual weakening, the proof we need can be found far more recently in the results of the 2016 municipal elections.

For better or worse, the May 2016 municipal elections were overshadowed by popular protests known as the "garbage uprising," which took place during the second half of 2015. Those demonstrations seemed to promise that civil society would emerge as more daring, increasingly assertive and generally inclined toward becoming politically aware. At the time, the Madinati phenomenon had gone viral. Almost every area in the country had produced a "starring" Madinati group or electoral list, which played directly into the hands of the media (particularly the foreign outlets), which were eager to report on something other than Lebanon's usual tedium.⁽⁸⁾ Unfortunately, that excitement helped to obfuscate some of the major issues that somehow reemerged spontaneously during the recent parliamentary elections.⁽⁹⁾

Following this lapse of attention, the larger outcome of the 2016 municipal elections indicated that AMAL and Hezbollah would share the municipal "pie" in south Lebanon while Hezbollah maintained control over the Bekaa, an area being challenged seriously by the Baalbeck Madinati ticket.⁽¹⁰⁾ The conclusions that can be drawn from these electoral precedents are obvious. Where the south is concerned, AMAL and Hezbollah indeed shared the pie; however, this was done at the expense of AMAL. Since 2016, no municipal council in south Lebanon has failed to include at least one overt or covert

⁽⁸⁾ Literally, madinati means my city, and a coalition of "civil society" activists formed during the 2016 municipal elections created a ticket named "Beirut Madinati." That convention ("city name + Madinati") was utilized similarly in various areas.

⁽⁹⁾ Notably, as early as September 2015, ShiaWatch issued a warning about the hollow nature of that excitement. See, "It Stinks! Taking Some Stock of the Lebanese Garbage Protests," at: <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/627>

⁽¹⁰⁾ Notably, Baalbeck Madinati's successful challenge to the Hezbollah ticket was due mainly to the fact that the municipal elections were organized according to a majority voting law, which focused anti-Hezbollah Sunni, Shia and Christian votes in one direction. This gave the false impression that Baalbeck Madinati was a promising start.

⁽¹¹⁾ The inroads Hezbollah made in the 2016 municipal elections were expressed conspicuously through a spike in "lifestyle" changes. While AMAL is typically far less concerned with gender separation, for example, Hezbollah is just the opposite. In 2016, several villages in south Lebanon (such as Jibsheet, Aytaroun and Khyam) experienced attempts by their newly elected municipality officials to enforce a policy of full gender separation. However, instructions issued by Hezbollah headquarters in Haret Hreik halted such Sharia enforcement.

⁽¹²⁾ See, for example, the perspicacious article by Ibraheem Bayram, "A Review of the Results of the [Municipal] Elections in South Lebanon: The Alliance between the [components of the] Duo is not OK." *An-Nahar*. May 25, 2016.

Hezbollah representative, who is happy to cast a veto in behalf of the "Alliance" (between the two entities) on any decision. Stated otherwise, this sharing relationship caused AMAL to lose control in almost all of Lebanon's south!⁽¹¹⁾ Where the Bekaa is concerned, as the new law on parliamentary elections prevented anti-Hezbollah Shia from enjoying the support of Sunni and Christian voters, Hezbollah was not only able to overwhelm its few Shia competitors, but was also able to divide its votes among its candidates. This proved its full mastery of the ground and demonstrated conclusively that AMAL's presence in the Bekaa is shrinking and becoming increasingly symbolic in nature....

As illustrated by the municipal elections held in south Lebanon, the decaying state of the AMAL-Hezbollah alliance did not escape notice by commentators on the Shia situation in Lebanon.⁽¹²⁾ Still, the situation has not received the attention it deserves. For most non-Shia Lebanese, these circumstances seemed tantamount to an internal Shia issue in which they cannot intervene. Unfortunately, this "non-interventionist" attitude also reflects pervasive unawareness of the reality that this shift in the balance of power within the Shia community may have fundamental outcomes on a national scale. Consider the speed at which this imbalance gained a foothold: just months after the 2016 municipal elections, Hezbollah choreographed the election of its candidate, General Michel Aoun, to the presidency of the republic. Later, Hezbollah had the final say on the law according to which the 2018 parliamentary elections were organized!

General Michel Aoun was elected on

⁽¹³⁾ On at least one occasion, the violence became physical. It was contained only by Hezbollah's strong and direct intervention.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Consider this description of the situation in the *Daily Star* on January 30, 2018: "Lebanon teetered on the verge of chaos Monday after a video showing Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil calling Speaker Nabih Berri a "thug" triggered a wave of street protests by the speaker's supporters, who responded by blocking a number of Beirut's major roads and vital arteries with burning tires."

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Jan-30/436050-bassil-video-puts-lebanon-on-edge.ashx>

October 30, 2016 against the will of Nabih Berri. Rather than a moody, military outsider, Berri was keen to fill the post (which has become increasingly honorific since the Taif Agreement) with a Maronite from within the political establishment. Since then, tensions between AMAL and FPM representatives (Aoun's party, which is headed by his son-in-law/Minister of Foreign Affairs) have continued to reach sometimes unprecedented levels of verbal and physical violence.⁽¹³⁾ Before this shift, the FPM would never have been so openly hostile to AMAL, and its leader certainly would never have dared to accuse Berri of being a "thug."⁽¹⁴⁾

Of course, some might wonder if the balance of power between AMAL and Hezbollah hadn't already begun to change irreversibly in 2005 when the international community prevailed upon the Assad regime to withdraw its forces from Lebanon—and Hezbollah stepped in quickly to defend the interests of the Syrian/Iranian consortium in Lebanon. Others might go even further and assert that the real tipping point in that power shift was Hezbollah's involvement in Syria. After all, Hezbollah's extra-national actions and distinction as a key Iranian proxy obviated any genuine comparison between it and other Lebanese parties, whether political or politico-military in nature—including the AMAL Movement.

Of course, these complex factors may seem too abstract to explain the behavior of Shia voters during the 2018 elections. Fortunately (relatively), things are not quite as obtuse as they may appear, and two major factors can help us bridge the notion of Hezbollah's *abstract* power and the ability it demonstrated during those recent elections to overwhelm AMAL. First,

increasing sectarianism in Lebanon and the region transformed large sectors of AMAL's constituency (a description used by a senior AMAL representative in 2015 during a chat with the authors of this Alert) into "ideologically occupied territory." Second, more Lebanese in nature, is the perception within the Shia community (and other communities) that Hezbollah exudes more sanctity and integrity than AMAL and other Lebanese political entities, the levels of corruption within which are favored topics of gossip on television talk shows and social media outlets. Certainly, some Hezbollah members and supporters are equally corrupt, but the abiding *perception* is that Hezbollah, especially in its guise as *the Resistance*, is beyond corruption. The propaganda argument associated with this general infallibility is simple but exceptionally effective: how can someone who gives his blood be swayed by earthly temptations? Hezbollah indeed capitalized heavily on that theme during the electoral campaign, and based on the results, we must admit that the fallacy, "I'm giving you *my blood* and protection, so you need to give me your votes," worked well. The argument is a fallacy, however, since Hezbollah is pretending to "give" those same people their own blood!

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The question today within AMAL is "What will "he" do now?"⁽¹⁵⁾ But where Nabih Berri is actually concerned, especially since the status quo within Lebanon's Shia community is not only changing dramatically and because it is also becoming clear that the Shia duo is simply another artifice in Hezbollah's collection of nicknames, the most important question for those concerned (due to egoistic or altruistic

⁽¹⁵⁾ The AMAL Movement has begun planning for a general convention to be held in September 2018, and speculation is already rampant that a reshuffling (of sorts) is in the offing. Still, given the state in which AMAL finds itself today, any organizational reform plan it adopts must be exceptionally unique to be effective.

is no longer the towering figure he was once. Beyond his age, Berri is perceived increasingly by Lebanese Shia as an incarnation of the “feudal Za’im” (traditional leader) rather than a combative “resistant.”

(2) Any drastic purge within the AMAL Movement will be interpreted as Berri having (finally) decided to organize his succession. When we accept that Berri’s reluctance to do so, which includes designating a successor, is one of the best tools he has to manipulate and control his entourage, we will understand that a purge is likely to weaken Berri’s control over his Movement. (3) Most importantly, it is in Hezbollah’s interest to maintain the impression of dual leadership within the community: the grim, black-turbaned “resistant” and the joking, neck-tied politician.... Nevertheless, the hierarchy that separates the two is unquestionably real: the duty of the “politician” is to serve the “resistant.”

Indeed, Nabih Berri was elected for the sixth consecutive time as speaker of the parliament on May 23, having captured 98 of the 128 votes available. However, his “victory” should be credited to Hezbollah rather than to Berri’s electability. If this proves anything, it is that Hezbollah wields exceptional skill in the area of electioneering, whether related to the larger matter of the popular vote, or when confined to parliamentary actions. Thus, an update to the perception surrounding the Shia duo and the balance of power within that association is urgently needed.

The verse from the Quran from which Hezbollah drew its name states, “the party of God [Hezbollah], they are the victors.” It would be wise to recall another divine promise, which holds, “My righteous servants

shall inherit the Earth.” From now on, and until the “Pompeo Doctrine” that seeks to stop Iran’s expansionism proves sufficiently capable, we can state with confidence that Hezbollah, which considers itself both righteous and victorious, is in the process of “inheriting” the AMAL Movement and everything it represents within Lebanon’s Shia community. A word to the wise: be aware that this process will reshape not just the Shia landscape, but also the entire Lebanese vista!